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SUBJECT: DHI QAR ELECTIONS UPDATE: PREPARATIONS AND
CORRUPTION RUMORS

This is a PRT Dhi Qar reporting cable.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The PRT met with Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) leadership on January 21 and found preparations for elections satisfactory. Voter outreach efforts continue throughout the province. Rumors of potential malfeasance abound but according to the GEO no serious infractions have been brought to their attention. The GEO welcomed the activities of the PRT observer missions and promised continued cooperation and coordination. End summary.

GEO Preparations

¶2. (SBU) Although the pace of preparations has accelerated, and the GEO found itself working through the night on occasion, the mood in the office appeared optimistic and relaxed. Shipment of sensitive materials such as ballots, voter rolls, and ink had been delayed due to unavailability of trucks, causing an immediate headache. GEO staff were confident that the shipment will be moved by road to Nasiriyah from Basra in a matter of days, well in advance of election day. The GEO expected to begin shortly the third stage of its training plan for elections officials, which will focus on polling station managers.

Voter Education and Early Voting

¶3. (SBU) GEO Director Alaa Abid Aould did not respond directly to the question of whether voters were clear on how to vote, but cited instead the voter education outreach activities conducted under GEO auspices and the activities funded and administered by the PRT and local NGOs. He noted that, for purposes of January 28 early voting, 17 special polling centers will be open for hospital employees, police, army, and others to cast ballots. Prisoners sentenced to terms of less than five years who are being held in institutions with at least 400 voters may also cast ballots. Prisoners charged but awaiting trial will not be able to vote. These early ballots will be sealed and stored, and will not be opened until the January 31 vote count. Alaa projected that preliminary results would be released in two days and definitive results would be reported eight days after the election.

Playing by the Rules

¶4. (SBU) Alaa reported small-scale disciplinary measures taken against candidates, pointing to the pasting of posters over those of other candidates as a typical ground for discipline. The GEO recently warned approximately 74 candidates to correct such violations within 72 hours or face fines. (Local press erroneously reported 75 parties fined for campaign violations, a figure exceeding the actual number of registered entities.) He assured the PRT that his office reviewed daily election-related complaints and updated Baghdad with daily reports. In most instances, the GEO acted

to verify or disprove complaints through site visits.

Popular Rumors of Malfeasance

15. (SBU) Contacts in the press circulated spicier rumors of underhanded tactics by local politicians to secure an edge among the voters -- accounts that the GEO maintains are unfounded. The allegations included an ISCI vote-buying campaign, with votes going for 6000 Iraqi Dinars; a scheme by partisan election workers to spoil certain ballots by making additional markings on them; a scheme by traditional leaders to replace poll workers in their district with a picked slate to monitor votes or alter ballots; and deals between traditional leaders and candidates to deliver a specific number of votes. A media contact who claimed first-hand knowledge told the PRT that local officials were using government resources to campaign, but added that he would not publish the allegations out of concern for his personal safety. Another media contact noted that some candidates were attempting to woo voters with free meals. In one instance, the bid backfired when guests became irritated with a local candidate, a businessman, who arrived hours late for his own lunch and failed to speak, much less justify his candidacy, to the prospective constituents.

Big Three and the Independents

16. (SBU) Media contacts observed that the election is marked by a wave of political unknowns and local professionals who have established "vanity" political entities who are

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attempting to benefit from widespread disillusionment with provincial government performance. While some made an initial splash, media and other contacts have complained that most of these candidates are simply faces on a poster, with no track record of service or policy positions. Most have declined to interact with the press on the grounds that the press is already in the pockets of particular candidates and parties. Interestingly, media contacts estimate that six to eight Sadrist candidates, who would not be able to win on the main Sadrist lists due to the Jaysh al-Mahdi's record of violence, have established one-candidate parties and will reveal themselves if they are elected. Despite the crop of newcomers, press contacts and the GEO believe that power will remain with the three major parties in the province: ISCI, Da'wa, and Fadhilah.

Comment

17. (SBU) Many of the rumors of potential malfeasance can be attributed to the standard gossip that occurs prior to elections, particularly in a country where the possibility of credible elections has not existed for decades. On the other hand, the GEO has a vested interest in proclaiming that the elections they are organizing have not been tainted. The PRT estimates that the truth is somewhere in between, with the very real possibility of vote-buying schemes as reported in other provinces. If the three major parties carry the vast majority of votes, as seems likely, there will be a higher perception that votes were bought. End comment.
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